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C O N F I D E N T I A L TAIPEI 003038

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SUBJECT: TAIWAN PROTESTS START OFF WITH A WHIMPER

Classified By: AIT Director Stephen M. Young, Reason 1.4 (b/d)

11. (C) Summary: Weekend protest demonstrations calling on President Chen to step down appeared poorly organized and under-attended partly as a result of heavy downpours. The "Depose Chen" campaign, led by former Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) Chairman Shih Ming-te, drew under 1,000 pre-registered participants during "trial" sit-ins on Ketagalan Boulevard on Sept 1-3. The campaign headquarters announced on Sunday that it was canceling further trial sit-ins through the week, ostensibly to prepare for the "massive" sit-in scheduled to start on Saturday, September 9. The Democratic Action Alliance, which also held its "Democracy Night Market" and anti-Chen rallies at Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Park this weekend, saw around 500 people turn out for its activities. Both protests were overshadowed Friday night by a free open air pop concert at Chiang Kai-shek Memorial, unrelated to the anti-Chen protests, that drew several thousand. End Summary.

12. (C) On its first weekend of mobilization the "Depose Chen" campaign turned in a lackluster performance, drawing only 500-800 participants for its "trial" sit-ins in front of the Presidential Office on Ketagalan Boulevard Friday and Saturday nights. Heavy rains caused the cancellation of activities on Sunday evening. Participants were required to sign up in advance for 1 hour slots for one of 230 seats, which probably worked to keep the crowd small. The overall turnout (including bystanders) came in well below the 10,000 mark predicted by some media and AIT contacts from the opposition pan-Blue camp. Soochow University Professor and "Depose Chen" campaign's international press spokesman Emile Sheng acknowledged to AIT September 5 that the small turnout has the campaign's leadership concerned that their movement is losing steam.

13. (C) "Depose Chen" memorabilia vendors at the sit-in said business was extremely slow and well below their expectations. Many of those in attendance seemed to be from the surrounding neighborhood, a deep Blue district, and in their 50s and 60s. Enthusiasm was rather muted and guest speakers appeared to have a difficult time energizing the crowd. Turnout at the nearby "Democracy Night Market," sponsored by the Democratic Action Alliance, was also sparse. Both events had less resonance with the public than a free open air pop concert on Friday night that brought several

thousand youth and young families to Chiang Kai-shek Memorial.

¶4. (C) During the weekend sit-in, "Depose Chen" campaign leaders appeared disorganized and rent by highly public internecine squabbling. On Sunday they halted the trial sit-ins, originally scheduled through the rest of the week. The campaign's spokesman announced that campaign members had gained enough experience at handling "a large" gathering and needed to focus on preparing for the main sit-in expected to start Saturday, September 9. Media coverage, however, focused on splits within the campaign's leadership, which forced the previous spokeswoman to step down. Sheng told AIT the fallout was in part driven by disagreements over what strategies to use to attract more participants for the main sit-in. Despite these troubles, campaign leaders raised their public projections for turnout on September 9 to 300,000 from their initial goal of 200,000.

Comment

¶5. (C) The "Depose Chen" campaign in its first demonstration activities appears to have gotten off to a lackluster start. Shih initially capitalized on widespread public dissatisfaction with President Chen and collected over NT\$100 million (USD 3 million) in donations two weeks ago. Shih now faces an uphill climb to restore enthusiasm and build up momentum ahead of the main sit-in scheduled for September 9. President Chen's decision to forge on with his four-day trip to South Pacific allies, on the other hand, is now paying dividends as media coverage has focused heavily on his efforts to boost Taiwan's diplomatic relations.

YOUNG